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TITLE: Theory to Practice: A Case Study in Preparing HIV Educators to Facilitate Behavior Change

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ISSUE: There is much published research to support the effectiveness of theory based skill-building sessions to encourage HIV prevention behavior. An important component is the set of skills needed by a facilitator to act as an effective change agent. As part of a new HIV prevention program developed by a national, nonprofit agency, a new facilitator training has been developed. It is designed to move facilitators away from information delivery and to prepare them to help people build HIV prevention skills in an interactive, multi-session learning environment. This case study examines the issues encountered during the initial implementation of the facilitator training.

SETTING: The program was formally released in 11 sites throughout the US and its territories, including an overseas military installation, in 1998. All 126 trainees had previous experience as HIV/AIDS educators.

PROJECT: Trainees participated in a 2-day course in which the skills needed to conduct effective interactive prevention sessions in the community were modeled and practiced. A central feature of the training was the concept of "letting go". Participants practiced engaging the group and drawing on their experiences, letting the group's needs drive the flow of exercises. An important factor in this process was feed back. After each practice opportunity, participants had a chance to give and receive feedback from peers and trainers. Another important concept was making links from exercises, such as role-plays, to behavioral theory. The objective was to help trainees understand how specific activities encourage people to adopt prevention behavior.

RESULTS: Trainees were assessed on their ability to apply key facilitation skills, such as asking open-ended questions, listening, managing silence, and climate setting to role-play, task group, and brainstorm activities. A total of 115 candidates were able to demonstrate skill mastery (91%); 85% reported feeling satisfied with the training overall.

LESSONS LEARNED: HIV educators came with different levels of understanding and experience in applying facilitation skills. The results showed that they could adopt new teaching styles. However, adopting a true facilitation approach can be challenging for some HIV educators. The biggest challenges came with the "letting go" concept. It was difficult for some to accept the concept of turning the content of exercises over to a community group for exploration. Results show that not all were able to demonstrate the skills. The necessary facilitation skills are not intuitive and must be learned and practiced. Therefore, facilitator training is an important element in programs that seek to encourage people to adopt HIV prevention behavior.

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